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## These are no revolutionaries

Behind the doubt that Islamic fundamentalists, Hindutva supporters and national socialists try to express in different ways lies the reality of a world in flux ... a world in which all that is solid melts into air, says TABISH KHAIR.



**In today's world, and the one in which we might live in, there are a series of doubts ... about belief, the sacred and the profane, and even identities.**

AT the heart of any profession of faith is doubt. Monotheistic religions are no exception to this. They tend to use the creative possibilities of doubt, accessed as ambivalence, and they also try to curb doubt from blossoming into disbelief.

What, for instance, does one need to do to become Muslim? One needs to repeat two lines from the Quran with sincerity. A simple requirement, and followed widely in Muslim societies — so much so that 19th Century European adventurers managed to enter Mecca (out-of-bounds for non-Muslims) by simply repeating these two lines in front of the local authorities.

But what are these two lines? Here is the most commonly published English translation till date:

*"There is no God but God;*

*Mohammed is His messenger."*

The first line starts with a complete negation, the epitome of doubt: "There is no God". But then the line turns into an affirmation, a profession of faith: "but God". In other words, "(there is) God". It is not just the meaning that is remarkable, the sounds (in the original Arabic) are just as significant: most of the sounds of the first half of this sentence are reversed in the second half. One starts with doubt and chooses to end in belief. One starts with negation, and is forced to find an affirmation. The philosophical dilemma of human existence is encapsulated in this line: the second line is an appendix that provides a specific social and historical basis for the negated negation of the first line.

If one has to simplify the complex histories of Muslim thinking in the world since these two

lines were first uttered, one can say that some Muslim thinkers have focussed more on the first line and some have focussed more on the second.

It was in the spirit of the first line that Ghalib penned lines like these in 19th century Delhi:

*"For God's sake leave the Kaaba's veil alone,*

*There too may lie hidden a god of stone."*

Or, to be exact, an "infidel idol/love" (*kaafirsanam*). It was also in the spirit of that first line that the 13th Century Persian-Turkish poet and Sufi saint, Jelaluddin Balkhi "Rumi" (born in Afghanistan) could claim, "the ways of worshipping are not to be ranked as better or worse. Hindus do Hindu things; Dravidian Muslims of India do what they do. It is all worship, and it is all right."

Such lines abound in the works of Muslim poets and thinkers, including Sufis who were and still are revered as saints by many devout Muslims. Such lines are often resented by jurists and Islamic traditionalists who would stress belief to the extent of erasing every trace of doubt.

It is these people that we often call "Islamic Fundamentalists" today. It's a new tribe, but it has descended from older ones: the tribe of traditionalists, the tribe of conservative jurists, the tribe of religious fanatics. But it is a new tribe, for one can be a "fundamentalist" only in societies where writing has become so widely disseminated as to make it possible to reduce the multiple religious practices within any lived religion to some global "fundamentals". Islamic fundamentalists are at the same time the most "traditional" and the most "modern" of all Muslims. In that respect, they are like Fascists (National Socialists, to be exact) in Europe, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in India. Islamic Fundamentalists would have been as impossible in most Muslim cultures before the rise of modernity and widespread literacy as Fascists would have been in Europe before the cauldron of the 20th Century had been set bubbling by Capitalism and revolutionary opposition to it.

The aim of Islamic Fundamentalists is not the exegesis of Islam. They would much rather skip the problems and potentials of the first line of their profession of faith. They want a social, political and economic order in which they can feel safe — and empowered. They want their message to be applied, and of course they would like to believe that their message is also Mohammed's message. Actually, they would like to believe that there could be no two opinions on Mohammed's message. And they would like us to believe that.

It appears that fundamentalists have chosen to freeze their Islam in time. In this too they resemble neo-Fascists in countries like Denmark and France, and for that matter many Hindutva nationalists in India. These nationalists have also chosen to freeze their national identity in time.

And in all cases, one is not really allowed to question the historicity of the time that is held up for emulation. In all cases, absolute belief is insisted upon.

For in all cases doubt lurks at the heart of this belief. Doubts about belief, doubts about the sacred and the profane, doubts about identities, doubts about the world we live in and might live in. Being unwilling to allow space for doubt, all these doubts have to be repressed into a Unitarian belief, whether one calls it fundamentalism or nationalism or "National Socialism". All pluralities have to be singularised — by force if necessary.

The excision of doubt is always bloody, and incomplete.

Behind the doubt that Islamic Fundamentalists, Hindutva supporters and National Socialists try to express in different ways lies the reality of a world in flux, a world in which all that is

solid melts into air. Islamic Fundamentalists see this world from one side, the National Socialists of Europe from another. One exclaims "It's like a snake!" another exclaims "It's like a pillar," but both fail to see the Elephant of Capitalism that they are blindly groping at.

Islamic Fundamentalists see the occasional historical overlap of Capitalism with (largely Protestant) Christianity and confuse the two. They need to do so. For one can fight "Christianity" with reference to some safely fixed idea of the past, while one would be forced to face the confusion of the present to tackle Capitalism.

And then Islamic Fundamentalists are seeking hegemony over people who call themselves Muslim. By definition, their "fundamentalism" is a modern and literate element — it is imbricated in Capitalism, just as the middle and upper class leaders of Islamic Fundamentalism are themselves beneficiaries of a global Capitalism that, in general, keeps most Muslims (and Christians, Hindus, etc in the "Third" World) in various degrees of powerlessness and impoverishment. Their opposition to this Capitalism tends to take symbolic shapes: they want to give it an Islamic face, they will not dismantle it. And the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) too would rather parade Capitalism in "Hindu" garb.

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The National Socialists and nationalists of Europe are not revolutionaries either. They want to control doubts about the future and some aspects of the melting down effects of Capitalism. And they will do it, oh yes, they will do it — in their own countries. They will do it by turning a blind eye to the fact that Capitalism is global and that their countries are basically beneficiaries of Capitalism. They would champion Capital, which has become global, without facing the fact that Labour has not become correspondingly global. They would hide this fact by making a fuss about the very limited labour mobility that global Capitalism has led to — less mobility today, in actual terms, than in the 19th century for example. And of course they would defend the welfare state for their own "people", or otherwise they would have to face the prospect of extending it to the world.

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